



Uranium (Nuclear)

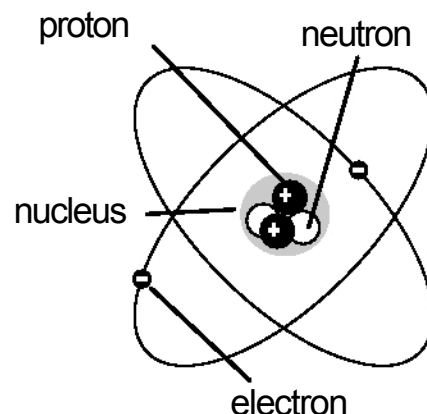
Uranium is a mineral found in rocks in the ground. Uranium is **nonrenewable**. We can't make more. There is plenty of uranium in many parts of the world. We split uranium atoms to release energy.

Atoms

Everything is made of **atoms**. Stars, trees, horses, air—all are made of atoms. Atoms are tiny, tiny particles.

Every atom is made of even smaller particles. In the center of an atom is the **nucleus**. It has **protons** and **neutrons** in it. Moving around the nucleus are **electrons**.

The number of protons tells us what kind of atom it is. So far, more than 100 different atoms have been found. You haven't heard of some of them. There are some you do know. **Hydrogen** is a gas—every atom of hydrogen has one proton. **Oxygen** has eight, **tin** has 50, and **uranium** has 92.

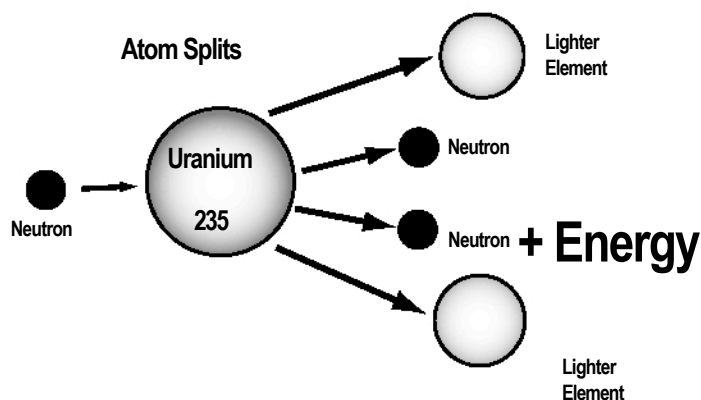


Nuclear Energy

There is energy stored in the nucleus of an atom. It is called **nuclear energy**. It holds the atom together. To use this energy, we have to set it free. There are two ways to free the energy in atoms.

The first way is to combine atoms to make a new atom. This is called **fusion**. The energy from the sun is from fusion. Inside the sun, hydrogen atoms combine to make helium. Helium atoms don't need as much energy to hold them together. The extra energy is released as light and heat.

Another way to free the energy in atoms is to split them apart. We can split one atom into two smaller atoms. This is called **fission**. The two smaller atoms don't need all the energy that held the larger atom together. The extra energy is released as heat and **radiation**.



We Use Nuclear Energy Every Day

Some power plants use fission to make electricity. Atoms of uranium are split into two smaller atoms. The extra energy is released as heat. This heat is used to make electricity.

Nuclear power is clean since no fuel is burned to pollute the air. And uranium is a cheap fuel. Right now, about 20 percent of our electricity comes from splitting atoms of uranium in nuclear power plants.

Radiation Can Be Dangerous

During fission, heat isn't the only energy that is released. Rays of energy, like x-rays, are also given off. These rays of energy, called **radiation**, can be dangerous. Radiation is everywhere. It comes from the sun and TV sets. When we break a bone or have cancer, radiation is used to help us. Small amounts of radiation from TVs and x-rays are not dangerous.

Large amounts of radiation can kill our cells and poison our food and water. Power plants are very careful to keep radiation from escaping. The power plants in the United States are required to follow rules to keep their employees and their communities safe.

Used Nuclear Fuel is a Challenge

The fuel from nuclear power plants produces radiation for a long time. After the fuel is used, it still is **radioactive**—it gives off radiation. It can't be put into a landfill. It must be carefully stored.

Some people don't think we should use nuclear energy. They think the radiation is too dangerous.

Other people think nuclear energy is a clean, safe way to make electricity.



Image courtesy of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Pacific Gas and Electric's Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant in California.